

Oil, the Middle East and U.S. National Security

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of oil imports on U.S. national security, especially an increasing dependency on petroleum resources from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region rendered particularly unstable lately, owing to the advent of pro-democracy movements taking place. After examining the historical bases for the recent political instability in the region, and considering the national security issues engendered by unrest in key oil producing states, the authors conclude that the only viable means for the United States to reduce oil imports and to attain energy independence would be through the adoption of alternative and renewable energy strategies.

Keywords: U.S. energy policy, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), economic development, national security, political unrest, OPEC

1. Introduction

Dependence on foreign crude oil, particularly on Middle Eastern oil, has long been viewed as a threat to America's economic and national security (Puckett and Klare). Currently, the United States consumes 25% of the world's oil, while possessing only 3% of the world's oil reserves. In his 2006 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush warned of an addiction to imported oil and its perils, calling it "a serious problem." Today, the United States imports up to 12 million barrels of crude oil per day (MBD), which accounts for nearly 60 percent of its total oil consumption (Braml, p. 118). By 2025, the U.S. will be importing over two-thirds of its oil needs. Yet there is no consensus about what should be done to shake the addiction (Blum). And at what price? The price of oil is set by the world market, based upon production levels decided by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), an intergovernmental organization originally created in 1960 whose stated objective is to "coordinate and unify the petroleum policies of member countries." Since at least 1993, the United States has imported on average nearly one-third (30.89%) of its oil from its hemispheric neighbors, Canada and Mexico. Both of these countries have long-standing and relatively stable relationships with the United States, though neither Canada nor Mexico is an OPEC member country. By comparison, oil from the Middle East—specifically from the Persian Gulf region (including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, all OPEC member countries)—accounts for on average 22.90% of all U.S. crude oil imports since 1993.

Some of these regimes in the Persian Gulf are unstable or even hostile to the U.S. And the amount of oil imported from this region is bound to increase in the near future, as production in neighboring countries likely diminishes and as the insatiable U.S. demand for oil increases (Miller, Cordesman and Ayoob). The long-term health and vitality of the U.S. economy depends on the supply of this precious resource from countries over which the United States government has little control. The recent uprising in Egypt and other North African and Middle Eastern countries demonstrated the increasing vulnerability of the U.S. economy's dependence on imported oil. The price of oil hovered near \$92 a barrel in Asia, as a chaotic power struggle in Egypt threatened the key maritime Suez Canal chokepoint. Oil jumped about 8 percent in a few days over fear that the chaos in Egypt could disrupt the 2 MBD that passes through the Suez Canal and the adjacent SUMED pipeline. As the uncertainty in the region continued, we witnessed levels above \$100 a barrel. Egypt produces no more than 600,000 barrels per day, which is mostly devoted to internal consumption. The real danger to the world's oil supply is when the turmoil in Egypt spreads to oil-rich Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Libya and Bahrain. We have already seen the unrest in Bahrain, Iran, Libya and Algeria. Close to 60 percent of all known conventional oil reserves are found in the Persian Gulf, which will likely be the last area to "peak," according to Paul Sullivan, Professor of Economics at the National Defense University.

“Many of other American suppliers will peak a lot sooner than some would hope,” Sullivan explains, “and some such as Mexico have already peaked given the knowledge that we have.” “As oil runs out for the smaller suppliers such as Nigeria, Brazil and Angola,” Sullivan adds, “the more important the Persian Gulf will become” (Crawford and Aguilera). Tensions in the Persian Gulf region may well spark different scenarios in the future, undermining U.S. national security. Furthermore, rising U.S. oil imports, especially from Persian Gulf countries, reduces the nation’s energy security. The United States will remain vulnerable to volatile oil prices and supply shortages as long as it heavily depends on unstable or otherwise inhospitable regions for fuel and energy. Its need for steady supplies of oil means that it must spend an exorbitant amount of resources to secure the free flow of oil to the world market. In January 1980, President Carter proclaimed the “Carter Doctrine,” in part to keep Persian Gulf oil out of Soviet control. Subsequent administrations have endorsed and pursued the same policies, aimed at keeping the tankers coming to Europe and the United States, using military force to provide security (Klare, p. 140). According to Princeton Fellow Roger J. Stern, oil security in the Middle East has cost the U.S. \$7.3 trillion dollars from 1976 to 2007. An economic analysis estimates the U.S. military tab on keeping Middle Eastern crude flowing at more than \$225 billion a year over the last three decades (Vergano). The focus of this paper is the growing threat to the U.S. national security resulting from its increasing demand for oil from unstable countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The sources of unrest and the peril of continued oil addiction to the U.S. economy and to U.S. national security will be analyzed.

2. The Sources of Unrest

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been struggling for the last few decades to grow its economy while maintaining its secular governments. However, something horrible has gone wrong in these countries, and there is little consensus about the cause of the crisis or how to go about making it right. The revolutions in information and communications technology and ideas in the twentieth century, especially following World War II, brought enormous and permanent changes to MENA societies. For a time, modernization offered great hope to the vast region, which stretches from Iran and Iraq in the northeast and includes the states of the Saudi Arabian peninsula and those westward along the North Africa coast, from Egypt to Western Sahara, as well as the state of Sudan. In many of these countries, modernization was aggressively pursued along with secular ideologies which excluded religious ideas and organizations from positions of political and social authority. In Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and other countries, the secular state seemed to offer a way to a better life and a new degree of independence and prestige in a post-colonial world.

Beset with domestic and international conflicts, secular regimes remained authoritarian and were loathed to take the risks involved in enacting programs of real transformation (Barwig). Bureaucracies quickly became bloated, corrupt, and incompetent. As James Bill and Carl Leiden emphasize, these regimes’ strategies involved a combination of bureaucratic centralization and a network of tight control to assure the security of their autocratic rule. Modernization produced rapid population growth and a wave of rural-to-urban migration. Middle Eastern and North African cities—Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran, Istanbul, and others—were characterized by urban sprawl, low living standards, inadequate housing and health care and decreased public services and sanitation. At the same time, state-led economic development failed to provide sufficient and meaningful employment, even for university graduates, and especially women (Karshenas and Moghadam). Educated youth expected to do much more than menial work, and most dreamed of Western levels of prosperity and lifestyles. The aspirations of many young people were out of reach. For far too many Middle Easterners and North Africans, modernization meant poverty, overcrowding, idleness, and feelings of deprivation, fatigue and frustration. As government bureaucrats and state leaders essentially abandoned the masses to their poverty and backwardness, a gulf between haves and have-nots opened, even in the wealthy oil-producing states (Mehanna, Yazbeck and Sarriddine).

A youth revolt against these autocrats and monarchs was in the making. A number of states experienced periodic bouts of unrest as early as the mid-1960s. The urban rage building up became startlingly clear in Egypt in January 1977, when cuts in subsidies on basic foods produced spontaneous rioting and strikes in Cairo, Alexandria and many other urban areas around the country. The government of Bahrain had to resort to force to put down a pro-democracy movement in 1994 and now is being challenged by a suppressed Shi’ite opposition (Dorraj, p. 42). The combination of the idle educated and the impoverished partially-educated masses looked particularly dangerous to those in power. Indeed, the young, educated, lower middle-classes led the urban poor in massive demonstrations. The young were in the forefront. About 60% of the region’s population is under 30. In Egypt, more than one-third of its population is between 15 and 29 (Dina). These millions of youth, who became more connected with the world through new communication and social networking technologies, have aspirations that need to be fulfilled. They have been aspiring for Western style democracy and freedom.

In a recent survey of Middle Eastern youth, the number one wish of the young in nine countries was to live in a free country; though, to be sure, jobs and the desire to live in well-run, modern societies ranked very high as well (Zakaria, "Why There's No Turning Back"). The autocratic regimes in MENA were not willing to develop requisite political structure to deal with the demands for greater openness and citizen participation, and they ruthlessly suppressed all political activities. They dismissed protesters' demands as advocating for Islamic fundamentalism or as a product of Western intrigue and interference. The only alternative to these regimes, as eminent political scientist Samuel P. Huntington notes, is political decay:

...The system either provides for this participation in ways harmonious with the continued existence of the system, or alienates the group from the system and produces overt or covert civil strife and secession (p. 140).

The rulers in these countries severely limited political participation. In spite of growing expectations of the newly educated young for a better government and for greater political participation, there were continuous declines in democratic norms, such as voting in national elections and participation in organized political activities. Bahrain, for example, after a brief experiment with political liberalization, closed the country's human rights organization in 2005 and jailed its leader. The promulgation of a new constitution in Qatar in 2004 institutionalized the absolute power of the emir and his family (Cook, p. 97). In Egypt, having allowed somewhat more open elections in 2005, the regime reversed course and rigged the elections massively in 2010, reducing the Muslim Brotherhood's representation in the 454-member parliament from 88 to 0. Ayman Nour, who ran against Hosni Mubarak in the presidential election of 2005, was arrested on trumped up charges, jailed, tortured, and finally released in 2009 (Zakaria, "Rage Across the Region").

There have been no free elections in these countries in last several decades. Rather than guarantee rights or give citizens a voice, political regimes in MENA tend to restrict political participation, limit individual freedom, and vest overwhelming power in the executive branches of government. Those who are politically aware have been suppressed, and those who have no political cognizance have been bought or forced by the ruling elite to vote and invest in the system with legitimacy. They have sought ruthlessly to suppress the rising expectations of the newly educated young, which itself is a byproduct of modernization. This situation in many aspects transformed the young, middle class and poor into a dissatisfied and potentially revolutionary group. Agitations against several MENA regimes in recent months mostly developed among newly educated young and the middle class. Their opposition to the regimes is a result of frustration that was caused by unemployment, poverty, a police regime, the lack of political channels for expression, censorship, and inefficient authoritarian bureaucracies. According to the World Bank, MENA has both the fastest-rising levels of education participation and the highest level of youth unemployment in the world (25 percent, compared to a global average of 14.4 percent). Youth unemployment is highest among those with more education; in Egypt in 2006, young people with a secondary education or higher represented 95 percent of the unemployed in their age group (Bilgin and Kilicarslan, p. 190).

All countries in the MENA region are potentially revolutionary. The leaders of many of these states, particularly those which possess extensive oil reserves, are not capable of the kind of economic development that can create massive employment opportunities for newly educated young people. On the other hand, these autocratic regimes have not seriously attempted to reform the political system to broaden political participation. Competitive or pluralistic politics are not usually allowed. Meaningful political parties and associational interest groups with diverse programs are either ineffective or banned. The youth in these countries have been denied outlets for political and civic participation. The resulting political consequence is the political and social turmoil that has swept the Arab and predominately Muslim world (Ehteshami and Wright; Hochman; Ünay). After several decades of limited attention, energy and national security questions are once again part of the strategic discourse. The political turmoil in MENA at the center of this revived debate, a reality strongly reinforced by the recent disruption of oil exports from Libya and rising gas prices. Regimes in MENA are facing potentially destabilizing combinations of population growth, rising unemployment or underemployment, and political discontent, in a region that contains more than half of world's petroleum reserves.

3. The Thirst for Oil and its National Security Implications

One of the leading concerns of American national security since the first modern "oil crisis" of the 1970s has been reliable access to energy supplies in adequate amounts and at reasonably affordable prices. The economic disruptions caused by the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the Arab Oil Embargo reinforced the existing perception of oil as a strategic commodity, vital to the prosperity and the security of the United States. The U.S. has been involved in several wars in the last two decades to secure access to MENA oil.

The rollback of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 was justified, in part, as an act in defense of world access to oil, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of global energy security (Lesser). According to Bill Bradley, former U.S. Senator from New Jersey, "The oil war that began in 2003 had cost us, by the end of 2006, some \$400 billion, with no letup on the horizon (Bradley, p. 90). The recent increases in oil prices are indicative of an underlying tightness in world oil markets, with conditions not unlike those of 1973 and 1979: rapid expansion in the global economy, crude production at nearly full capacity worldwide and declining investments in the new production (Salameh, p. 129). The current unrest in MENA could lead to serious supply interruptions of a very different sort, as internal strife interferes with production and exports. The uncertainties regarding regional security, including a heightened instability in Saudi Arabia and the smaller Persian Gulf States of Bahrain and Oman, have already increased the prospect for price volatility. The price of oil went up almost 20 percent immediately following the interruption in oil production in Libya. Libya is the world's 18th largest oil producer, providing almost 2% of global daily output. The greater fear stalking markets is that the revolts will spread to OPEC's heavyweights, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, the group's main producers (Piovano). The real danger to the economic and national security of the United States is the potential instability of the Saudi regime in the face of regional tensions. The potential for internal instability in Saudi Arabia may well be the leading sources of energy security risk over the next few years (Ayoob, p. 153).

There is another important risk to oil supply that is worth mentioning. Some states, or terrorist groups, might attack or threaten to attack specific energy-related targets. The September 11 terrorist attacks offer a reminder of that potential, and several press reports in 2002 suggested that terrorist networks had planned attacks on shipping in the MENA region and sensitive oil infrastructure. In May 2004, gunmen believed linked to al-Qaeda attacked the Saudi port of Yanbu' al Bahr, an important petroleum shipping terminal, and murdered five Western engineers working there. In February 2006, other militants thought to be affiliated with al-Qaeda attacked the Abqaiq processing facility in Saudi Arabia, where 6.8 MBD of oil are processed (Deutch and Schlesinger, p. 23; Klare, pp. 142-43). The MENA region will continue to occupy a dominant position in world energy trade. Presently, of the 700 billion barrels available in global oil reserves, more than half is found in MENA. This fraction is actually expected to increase with new exploration, and the overall contribution of MENA supply to world trade will grow with increases in production capacity. However, the new discoveries will not likely ease pressure on energy markets, as the Asian (China, Japan and India) energy demand is rising and is expected to continue to rise, which will comprise much of the total increase in world oil demand, from some 86 MBD to more than 118 MBD in 2030 ("Peak Oil Primer"). According to the International Energy Agency's (IES) projection, Chinese oil consumption alone will more than double, from 7.7 MBD in 2008 to 16.3 MBD by 2030 (Lyon, Lefton, and Weiss). Although the U.S. imports most of its oil from other regions than MENA, this oil is still obtained at world market price. What happens in MENA influences the supply and the price of oil elsewhere.

The political turmoil in key oil producing states will have lasting implications for the U.S. economic and national security as its dependence on imported oil continues to rise. Since 1973, every American president has announced a "new" initiative to wean America from its dependence on foreign oil (Lichtblau). President Nixon's "Project Independence" called for America's self-sufficiency in energy by 1980. In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Energy Policy and Conservation Act to set federal standards for energy efficiency in new cars for the first time (Fehner and Holl, p. 19). In 1977 President Jimmy Carter declared that energy independence was the "moral equivalent of war." Carter established the Department of Energy, with a main goal of achieving energy independence by 1990. President Reagan's Department of Commerce warned the American public that "oil imports threaten to impair the national security." And every President since then has talked about freeing America from dependence on foreign oil. President Barack Obama, on March 30th, 2011, announced a new goal: to reduce oil import by a third in the next decade.

Today, despite more than 50 years of government-sponsored programs, U.S. consumption and importation of oil from foreign countries have increased steadily. The American government has done almost nothing to deal with the central problem of dependence on oil, and especially dependence on insecure sources of foreign oil. In fact, the United States tripled its oil imports from 1985 to 2008, while domestic production fell by nearly 50 percent. In his testimony before United States Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in 2009, Retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Denny McGinn noted: "In 2008, we sent \$386 billion overseas to pay for oil—much of it going to nations that wish us harm. This is an unprecedented and unsustainable transfer of wealth to other nations. It puts us in the untenable position of funding both sides of conflict and directly undermines our fight against terror." Much of America's oil dependency relies on imports from unstable parts of the world. One in five barrels of U.S. oil comes from countries that the State Department considers to be "dangerous or unstable" (Lyon, Lefton, and Weiss).

America is buying billions of dollars of oil from Middle East, a region that is swept by political turmoil. "American overdependence on oil has led to a hapless foreign policy in the Arab world," argued Thomas D. Kraemer of the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College. The CNA Military Advisory Board's report in May 2009 entitled "Powering America's Defense: Energy and the Risks to National Security," concluded that "U.S. dependence on oil weakens international leverage, undermines foreign policy objectives, and entangles America with unstable or hostile regimes." As the Council of Foreign Relations warned: "major energy consumers—notably the United States, but other countries as well—are finding that their growing dependence on imported energy increases their strategic vulnerability and constrains their ability to pursue a broad range of foreign policy and national security objectives" (Deutch and Schlesinger). For example, Iran is using oil revenues to finance development of nuclear weapons and to insulate themselves from the economic sanctions that could result. In order to ensure the steady supply of oil from Middle East, the United States has been forced to support all these totalitarian regimes who rule their country with iron fists without any regard for freedom and democracy. Many of the sources of global terrorism spring from the archaic social conditions within Saudi Arabia and the vast stores of oil money that the ruling royal family controls. The suppression of growing demand for political freedom and political change has fueled the rise of a destructive terrorism. The Saudis are not tolerant of freedom and democracy and the United States is tolerant of its oil suppliers (Wahby).

America is hamstrung because any forceful action on its part against nations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain could result in the disruption of oil supplies on which the U.S. and global economy necessarily depend. The addiction to oil only serves to contaminate our true values when acting in MENA. Besides contaminating our intent to bring freedom and democracy to the region, American oil money actually is bolstering governments which are diametrically opposed to American values. In places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, and Bahrain, oil revenues are used to insulate the regimes from any pressure to open up their economies, liberate their women, or allow freedom (Hertog). Huge oil windfalls have created societies led by the wealthy dictators and monarchs who have no incentive for reform. The problem with the totalitarian governments of the oil states is that the people have been suppressed to the point that they do not have any other alternative than resorting to revolution to bring reform and change, as it is happening today throughout the MENA region. In the Arab-Muslim world, the ruling elite has been able to sustain themselves in power without ever empowering their people—without ever allowing progressive parties to emerge—because they have massive oil revenues to keep their people quiet and themselves in power.

They have never had to tap their people's energy and creativity because they simply had to tap an oil well. Therefore, politics in these countries has never been about building a society that maximizes people's ability to innovate, export, and compete. Little has been done to create globally competitive economies or employment for a burgeoning number of young adults. However, despite the massive oil revenues, the countries of the MENA region are now confronting an economic challenge that is just as steep: how to engage with a global economy that in many ways has passed them by. Funds from oil exports are rarely distributed among the people of oil-exporting countries. They often remain concentrated in the hands of a small group of ruling elites who exploit revenues to preserve their own hold on power. Although Saudi Arabia is seen in the West as a rich country, with a population of 25 million, the petrodollars do not go as far, and the disparity between rich and poor is vast, with at least 15% unemployment rate (Helman; Goujon and Barakat).

4. Conclusion: Uncertain Future

Unrest and revolution are expected to keep spreading throughout MENA. The main question is: what kind of political arrangements will replace these old regimes? The future is uncertain. As long-time and former U.S. diplomat R. Nicholas Burns noted: "We are witnessing rebellion of the Arab people throughout the Arab world. While it may be most acute in Bahrain and Libya, there is every reason to believe that it will continue to spread for the time being (Murphy). The crisis in MENA—which has brought down governments in Tunisia and Egypt and sparked protests in Yemen, Bahrain, Iran, Morocco, Syria and Jordan—has rattled the world's oil market. It is often said that the process of transition to democracy is "messy." Transition from despotism to freedom and democracy is a daunting task anywhere, and in Middle East it is a profound challenge. Future MENA governments might attempt to use oil as a form of economic warfare with global effects. In a less direct fashion, a deteriorating security environment in the region could alter the outlook for dialogue and cooperation among producers and consumers, with lasting implications for energy security. National security, military, and intelligence experts have spoken out about the need for a comprehensive strategy that takes on the destabilizing effects of fossil fuel dependence and global climate change. "Without bold action now to significantly reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, our national security will be at greater risk," testified Vice Admiral McGinn. "Fierce global competition and conflict over dwindling supplies of fossil fuel will be a major part of the future strategic landscape."

“The only way for America’s energy supply to be truly secure is by permanently reducing our dependence on oil,” President Obama said in March 2011. “We are going to have to find ways to boost our efficiency so that we use less oil. We’ve got to discover and produce cleaner, renewable sources of energy that also produce less carbon pollution that is threatening our climate. And we have to do it quickly.” To achieve this goal would require transformational technology for electric cars and biofuels and billions of new government spending on breakthrough technologies and a tolerance for high energy prices by consumers and businesses. It would require big government subsidies and taxes to build more high-speed rail lines, to encourage trucks and bus fleets to switch to natural gas and to push the development of wind, solar and geothermal energy.

Expanding domestic oil production alone will not solve the U.S. energy problem. Drilling is not the solution to America’s energy challenges. As President Obama put it, “We have less than 2 percent of the world’s oil reserve; we consume more than 20 percent of the world’s oil (Lyon, Lefton, and Weiss). Drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska will not close the supply gap. The amount of recoverable oil in the Arctic coastal plain is estimated to supply as little as a year’s supply of oil. And it will take 10 years to produce any oil from this supply. In addition to increasing domestic production and conservation, diversification, particularly alternative and renewable energy, is the only viable way to reduce U.S. addiction on oil (Kalicki; Chambers and Yetiv). Technology will be vital to making a transition away from petroleum fuels. If the United States continues its overreliance on fossil fuels, it will become increasingly dependent on oil producing nations in a highly volatile and chaotic region of the world, much to its peril.

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